



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on Belarus

As delivered by Ambassador Stephan M. Minikes
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
November 13, 2003

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. The U.S. joins the EU in welcoming Ambassador Heyken to the Permanent Council and thanks him for his report on the work of his office.

We recall that Ambassador Heyken's first visit to the Permanent Council on April 2 was an occasion of hope. The OOM's mandate had been adopted some months before and Ambassador Heyken had just taken on his appointment.

We joined others on that occasion in expressing hope that the OOM would realize its full promise in assisting Belarus in promoting institutions, consolidating rule of law, and developing relations with civil society. We even took the occasion to welcome Belarus' stated openness to the participation of NGOs on four Working Groups, including the Working Group on Civil Society.

Seven months later, we must clearly and unequivocally conclude that this promise has not been realized. Since June alone, two NGOs, four NGO resource centers, and one trade union have been liquidated. Another six NGOs have received warnings threatening liquidation. Meanwhile, no fewer than five newspapers have been closed and another two newspapers have been threatened with closure. Ambassador Heyken has described this assault on civil society and the independent media as "systematic." Given the scale of the campaign, that characterization is clearly appropriate.

Mr. Chairman, we want to look forward, not backward. Belarus has defended its actions as consistent with Belarusian law and, as such, grounded in respect for the rule of law. Obviously, if that is the case, there's clearly a problem with Belarusian laws or their implementation. It is simply not tenable to contend that Belarus is meeting its commitments to respect NGOs and independent media in the face of a campaign against them.

Let us address this problem. We appreciate the role the OOM has assumed in monitoring and reporting objectively on developments in Belarus. This needs to continue. However, Belarus' reference to its laws as the source of the concerns we find there offers this organization here an opportunity to address them. Belarus has also welcomed greater focus on project activities.

The concerns raised in Belarus fall into four different categories: elections, NGOs, media freedom, and religious freedom. We would urge the OOM to work with ODIHR and the Office of the Freedom of the Media to elaborate projects for the review of

Belarusian legislation in these areas with a view to correcting deficiencies in the laws and their implementation. To that end, we would propose greater funds be dedicated in the OOM budget to facilitate development of such projects. That would be a significant step forward.

Separately, we are disappointed that the Working Group on Civil Society has not made significant progress. In April, we conveyed hope this Working Group would benefit from participation of representatives from both the Belarusian Government and from civil society. As such, it could have provided a foundation for assisting Belarus in developing its relations with civil society. This potential is in no way being realized. We would therefore urge the OOM, and the Belarusian Government, in particular, to redouble efforts to make this Working Group a useful tool for mandate implementation.

Mr. Chairman, we have witnessed a serious deterioration in respect for OSCE commitments in Belarus in the course of the year. It is essential the OOM make every effort to develop projects to address those concerns. The success of OOM efforts requires, however, the commitment of the Belarusian Government to cooperate with these efforts and we call upon the Belarusian Government to do so now. Thank you.